

# *Aesthetics Appreciation in Literature and Arts* ——*Commentary of Zhu Guangqian's On Beauty*

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**Abstract:** Since Hegel established a complete idealistic aesthetic system and Baumgarten first proposed the concept of aesthetics, aesthetics as a specialized science has been figuring out many questions, such as "what is beauty", "what is the essence of beauty", "what is beauty in literature and art", which have been argued and debated endlessly, but can be exactly answered in Mr. Zhu Guangqian's *On Beauty*, thus making beginners have a preliminary understanding and mastery of aesthetic issues.

## 1. Introduction

What is beauty? Where does beauty come from? What are the characteristics of beauty? How to appreciate beauty in literature and art? These topics have been discussed by numerous literary and artistic aestheticians for thousands of years, and a solid aesthetic system has been formed in the process of research. Nowadays, there are numerous books on aesthetics, which are detailed, concise, informative or lengthy, while the book *On Beauty* written by Zhu Guangqian in 1932, a famous literary and artistic esthetician, is a very classic introduction to aesthetics.

After its publication, *On Beauty* has been a best seller for more than 80 years and has been reprinted by dozens of publishing houses, thus leading numerous scholars into the palace of aesthetics, understand the aesthetic common sense, appreciate the aesthetic charm. Mr. Zhu Guangqian wrote this book with a sense of mission and responsibility, and used simple, fluent and understandable language and a large number of practical examples of literature and art to analyze the profound aesthetic theory in a reasonable and systematic way, explore the basic problems in aesthetics, and open one aesthetic window after another for readers, thus "leading readers from art to life, and bringing life into art" (preface to *On Beauty* by Zhu Ziqing) [1], which plays a role in purifying the mind and improving the spiritual realm.

## 2. Content Summary

Before writing the book *On Beauty*, Mr. Zhu Guangqian also wrote a book named *Twelve Letters to Youth*, where he talked about literary, aesthetics, philosophy, morality and other issues in the form of letters, thus arousing great repercussions, while this book mainly talks about life accomplishment, and has not fully demonstrated Zhu Guangqian's aesthetic ideas. As a companion to *Twelve Letters to Youth*, the book *On Beauty* is written by Zhu Guangqian under the subtitle of *Thirteenth Letter to Youth*.

Centered on aesthetic experience, this book always closely relates to the relationship between beauty and life to analyze a series of aesthetic psychological elements such as intuition, empathy, imagination, association and inspiration, clarify the conditions and rules of appreciation and creation of beauty, and ultimately fall to the goal of artistic life and aesthetic education for people. Then it holds that aesthetic education can not only make people happy and make life artistic, but also realize the innovation of values, thus human nature is liberated and national spirit is revitalized.

With the preface written by Zhu Ziqing, a famous essayist, this book includes fifteen chapters, that is fifteen topics, fifteen letters to youth, in which, chapter I to chapter III mainly discuss what beauty is and where it comes from; chapter IV to chapter VI criticize the viewpoint of confusing aesthetic feeling and pleasure, aesthetic feeling and association, appreciation and textual research; chapter VII to chapter VIII further discuss beauty itself and point out the mistakes of realism and idealism; chapter IX to chapter XIV discuss artistic creation and artistic appreciation; chapter XV corresponds to the beginning and encourages readers to pursue the art of life. These fifteen chapters are interlinked with coherent thought, whose sections are not long but with incisive elaboration, thus exploring many aesthetic issues in simple terms and making reader's body and mind be baptized again and again [2].

## 3. Aesthetics

In the book *On Beauty*, the author talks about many aesthetic issues, aesthetic concepts, aesthetic ideas and aesthetic methods, while several of them are very incisive and unique, which play a good guiding role for today's literature and arts.

First, Mr. Zhu puts forward the important topic that "distance produces beauty". It seems that everyone understands "distance produces beauty", but Mr. Zhu theoretically elaborates clearly what is "distance produces beauty", why "distance produces beauty", how to use distance to produce beauty and other aesthetic issues. In chapter II *Lookers-on see most of the game*, the author first narrates four or five practical cases of discovering and feeling beauty in life, and naturally draws a very important conclusion from the examples that all of these people will encounter, that is, "To see the beauty of things themselves, we must jump out of the practical world and appreciate them in the spirit of 'did it just out of interest'. In short, there is a distance between beauty and real life" [3]. In order to clarify this conclusion, the author also demonstrates it from both positive and negative aspects, points out that the so-called "distance" must be appropriate, but not too far, and even elaborates it in detail with Wang Yuyang's *Autumn Willow*, so as to make the concept of "art must be distant from real life" more popular, thus we can really understand the philosophy of "lookers-on see most of the game" when reading the verse "I don't know the true face of Lushan Mountain, but

only because I am in the mountain" in Su Dongpo's poem of *Inscribing the Wall of Xilin Temple*.

Secondly, Mr. Zhu points out the connection and difference between textual research and appreciation, which is of great critical significance for the reality that when evaluating literary and artistic works, most of the academic circles only pay attention to textual research and criticism which are regarded as appreciation by them, thus ignoring the real appreciation. In elaborating this problem, the author starts with the fact that when he was studying in Britain, the professor only taught Shakespeare's "version criticism", but ignored the beauty of the work itself, thus drawing the conclusion that textual research gains knowledge of history, which can help to appreciate but not appreciation itself", and pointing out the two errors of textual research addiction in righteous words. Then, the author further analyses the four categories of critics and points out that "the attitude of criticism is calm, not mixed with emotions... while the attitude of appreciation pays attention to the communication between my feelings and posture of objects. The attitude of criticism should be understood by introspection, while the attitude of appreciation depends entirely on intuition". [1] Finally, the author emphasizes that textual research is not appreciation, and criticism is also not appreciation, but appreciation can not be separated from textual research and criticism. The real appreciation is to indulge in an aesthetic experience in literary and artistic works with emotion. Therefore, it is totally incorrect for academic circles to only pay attention to textual research and criticism, but neglect or even deny that appreciation is academic, which should be reversed.

Thirdly, Mr. Zhu talks about the topic of "genius and inspiration" and their relationship in chapter XIV by using many examples from a psychological point of view, which had been discussing by scholars since ancient times. Mr. Zhu first explains why there are geniuses, and the answer is that in addition to genetics and environment, individual efforts is more important for the generation of geniuses. Then, Zhu Lao explained in detail the three characteristics of inspiration: sudden appearance, sudden departure and involuntary, while it can be said that the inspiration thinking has been interpreted very well. What's more, from the perspective of "subconscious" psychological activities, Mr. Zhu deeply analyzes that "inspiration refer to the emotions brewing in subconscious suddenly emerged in consciousness... It is the harvest of subconscious work in consciousness"[4], which is quite different from the previous discussions on inspiration thinking, thus making readers really understand the implication of great poet Du Fu's "only through reading thousands of books can one write fluently", and better understand that understand that genius and inspiration come from diligence and efforts. To grasp inspiration, we must have the consciousness and ability to grasp inspiration [5].

Fourthly, Mr. Zhu talks about the topic of "art of life" in chapter XV. Many aesthetic books talk about theory on the basis of theory, and the reason why Mr. Zhu's book is fascinating is that he closely combines aesthetics of literature and art with life. While affirming that there is a distance between art and real life, he also believes that "there is no art without life" and that "life is a kind of art in a broad sense" [6], which are the thought-provoking remarks. Mr. Zhu further elaborates that a good article must be the display of perfect personality and the expression of deep feelings, and criticizes both vulgar and hypocritical people, thus pointing out that their lives are the least artistic, while the real artist's lives are serious, persistent, meticulous, open-minded, optimistic and even better. Then the "supreme good" is "did it just out of interest". Finally, Mr. Zhu puts forward a philosophical and thought-provoking saying, that is, "art is an activity of interest, and the life of art is also a life of abundant interest... The richer the interest is, the happier the life will be" [7], and

warns us that we should pay attention to appreciate the various states and beauty of life while walking in life. We should "walk slowly and appreciate! Be a blessed man!" [1] This makes us deeply understand that there is no lack of beauty in life, but the lack of eyes to find beauty. Only by maintaining an open-minded and optimistic mood, adhering to a positive attitude towards life, paying attention to life's perceptions, and carefully reading literary works, can we truly enjoy life. Mr. Zhu's words are popular and profound.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Zhu Guangqian's book *On Beauty* continues the ideas of Wang Guowei and other aestheticians in the Republic of China and absorbs the essence of western literary psychology. In the form of letters and chatting, the book uses clear language to illustrate a series of profound and thought-provoking aesthetic problems with examples of people's favorite stories and classic works of literature and art, thus completely reach the simple purpose of Mr. Zhu's creation of this book, namely, "free from vulgarity" [8], so that readers can not only enter the aesthetic hall and understand the aesthetic knowledge, but also purify the essence, enhance their accomplishment, and savor Wang Xizhi's so-called "though high and low they grow in view, for me there is nothing but new."

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